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Peter S. Beagle's Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn

Weronika Łaszkiewicz

Though Peter S. Beagle clearly stated that, despite the immense success of *The Last Unicorn* (1968), he was unwilling to write about unicorns ever again ("Paradoxa Interview"), these mythic beasts have continued to reappear in his fiction for almost half a century—in "Julie's Unicorn" (1995), *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996), and "Two Hearts" (2005). Yet in every subsequent text Beagle's unicorn is somewhat different from its predecessor, and in some cases strikingly different from its traditional counterpart. To analyze how, and then answer why, Beagle has transformed the traditional unicorn mythos, it is useful to start with Bogdan Trocha's 2009 book on myths in modern fantasy literature, entitled *Degradacja mitu w literaturze fantasy* (*The Degradation of Myth in Fantasy Literature*; translation of the title mine). Trocha claims that modern fantasy's "recycling" of elements borrowed from myths ultimately leads to the degradation of myths. Among the frequently borrowed elements, he singles out names (of gods, angels, demons, places, artifacts, etc.), fabulous creatures (e.g. leprechauns, trolls, ogres, fauns, vampires, werewolves, and unicorns), concepts (such as Balance, Harmony, Conflict, Destiny), events and patterns (e.g. creation and destruction, quest and return, cataclysm and fall), visions of the world and afterlife, and various symbols. He argues that these elements/themes, when borrowed by fantasy texts, are usually fragmentary and isolated from the original context. "Unnecessary" parts/features of the borrowing are either eliminated or reduced (the borrowing is then limited to a few external characteristic features which might form an incomplete—and even stereotypical—image of the chosen entity); condensed (the entity appearing in a secondary world consists of layers of mythological references), or transposed (the features or abilities originally characteristic for one mythological entity are moved onto another one). These fragmentary mythological borrowings can be then supplemented by the author's vision of a secondary realm; Trocha uses the term "mythopoetic speculation" (Polish *spekulacja mitopoetycka*; translation mine) to describe fantasists' creative attempts at incorporating mythic themes and images into their narratives (Trocha 197-213).

Trocha investigates the ways in which myths are reworked by fantasy books in order to exemplify what he calls the degradation of myth in the genre. He

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acknowledges the fact that various attempts at mythopoetic speculation imbue fantasy books with remnants of mythological knowledge which enriches the imaginary realms. At the same time, he argues that myths "recycled" by fantasy can be desacralized (separated from the sphere of sacred beliefs to which they frequently belong), distorted, and wrongly interpreted. His claims are supported by Brian Attebery's article "Exploding the Monomyth: Myth and Fantasy in a Postmodern World," in which Attebery contends that mythological borrowings within fantasy literature are often separated from their primary culture/society and, as a result, exploited. In turn, fantasy books which only recycle well-established mythological patterns become formulaic and predictable.

This threat, however, does not seem to pertain to Beagle's unicorns. As George M. Eberhart points out in his study of fabled animals, "[u]nicorn legends have a long and cosmopolitan history ranging throughout most of Europe, Africa, and Asia," and details of the unicorn mythos vary across cultures (567). Even if we assume that the unicorn transformed by Beagle is exclusively the European unicorn, it is still impossible to claim that these transformations abuse the culture of a particular community, because the single-horned beast has never been the property of a single group/society. In addition, though Beagle's unicorns display some features consistent with the traditional European mythos, their subsequent transformations (part of Beagle's mythopoetic speculation) reduce the degree of predictability. Nevertheless, Trocha's and Attebery's warning that a mythological borrowing may become distorted due to its various transformations in fantasy fiction cannot be easily dismissed. Therefore, we will analyze the degree to which Beagle's works (to use Trocha's terminology) eliminate, reduce, condense, or transpose elements of the traditional unicorn mythos, we will investigate the new elements introduced by Beagle into the mythos, and finally study the results of these transformations. Beagle is, of course, not the only fantasist that has become involved with unicorns. These elusive creatures have appeared in, for example, Bruce Coville's *The Unicorn Chronicles* (1994-2010); Tanith Lee's trilogy *Black Unicorn* (1991), *Gold Unicorn* (1994), and *Red Unicorn* (1997); Meredith Ann Pierce's Firebringer trilogy: *Birth of the Firebringer* (1985), *Dark Moon* (1992), and *The Son of Summer Stars* (1996); as well as in anthologies: Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois's *Unicorns!* (1982) and *Unicorns II* (1992), *The Unicorn Treasury* (1988) edited by Bruce Coville, and *Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn* (1995) edited by Peter S. Beagle and Janet Berliner. Though cross-sectional research on unicorns appearing in these works would most likely be very thought-provoking, this paper will focus exclusively on Beagle in order to show the extent of transformation which the single-horned beast has undergone within the imagination of one author. Yet before we can discuss the changes introduced by Beagle, we should summarize the themes and images traditionally associated with unicorns.

The unicorn has always been perceived as one of the most noble and ethereal creatures. In the European folklore, it is traditionally recognized as the symbol of

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purity and chastity. Any pursuit after this swift creature is doomed to fail. Only when approached by a virgin does the unicorn become peaceful and submissive. Linda S. Godfrey claims that the unicorn appeared in human imagination as early as in Chaldean artwork from around 3500 BC (26); thus, unicorns have "accompanied" people for thousands of years. In antiquity they were mentioned mostly in texts relating to natural history and were described as creatures supposedly encountered in distant and exotic lands. Cassandra Eason states that the unicorn was

> first described in 398 BCE by the Ancient Greek naturalist Cresias. He travelled throughout Persia and the Far East and told of a creature he encountered that seems remarkably similar to the fabled unicorn, with a white horse body, a dark red head and dark blue eyes, and a three-colored, pointed horn about one-and-a-half feet long. (xiii)

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance unicorns frequently appeared in literature, particularly in bestiaries and in love poetry—for example, in one of Thibaut de Champagne's (1201–1253) poems the unicorn is a metaphor describing a lover approaching his beloved (qtd. in Ruud 628). In addition to literature, unicorns were present in medieval heraldry and in tapestries which illustrated attempts to capture the beast. The most famous tapestries are *Dame à la licorne* (today exhibited in the Musée de Cluny, Paris) and *The Hunt of the Unicorn* (exhibited in the Cloisters division of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City). What is more, fascination with unicorns inspired not only several works of art, but also real-life pursuits after the beast. Newly discovered animals, like narwhals, antelopes or rhinoceroses, were often mistakenly identified as the mythic unicorn. People chased after the beast so persistently not only because of its beauty, but also because of its horn which, according to some legends, could be turned into poison (Steffler 126) or an aphrodisiac (Eason 86). Also Christianity, by adopting the unicorn as one of its prominent symbols, has contributed to the preservation of the unicorn mythos. The Christian tradition focuses on the beast's purity and strength, as well as on the rich imagery surrounding its captivity:

> According to legend, the unicorn could be caught only with the aid of a virgin, in whose lap the trusting animal sought refuge—a posture that enabled hunters to trap and kill the beast. This was seen as a symbol of the Virgin Mary's conception of Christ and of his subsequent arrest and crucifixion. (Steffler 126)

In the Christian tradition, the untainted unicorn, exposed to harm because of a virgin, became a representation of Jesus Christ. Given this multi-faceted, centuries-long fascination with the unicorns, it should not come as a surprise that this mythic beast is still a powerful symbol frequently adopted by artists from various fields, including

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fantasy literature. The eponymous character of Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* is probably the most popular fantasy unicorn in the world. Even so, it is quite distant from its traditional counterpart.

The element which is almost entirely eliminated from the story, apparently unneeded even though the plot is set in a quasi-medieval world, is the fascination with a unicorn's horn—none of the characters ever suggests that Unicorn should be captured so that her attribute might be turned into a poison or aphrodisiac. Instead, they are all fascinated with her immortal beauty and purity. In fact, Geoffrey Reiter (2009) argues that exploration of immortality and mortality is one of the main themes of the novel; consequently, he offers a reading of *The Last Unicorn* which highlights the heroes' experiences of both states. For Mommy Fortuna, King Haggard and Captain Cully mortality is equal to doom and hence their struggle to reach immortality: both Mommy and Haggard imprison mythic creatures for their own delight, whereas Cully surrounds himself with a façade of lies because of his paradoxical desire to become more real than the mythic Robin Hood. While Cully's illusion is brutally shattered by Schmendrick's magic, Mommy's and Haggard's punishment for the crime of usurping reign over immortality, and imperishable beauty in the case of unicorns, is death. Yet despite their errors, both Mommy and Cully with their fake lives, and Haggard "with his dreadful hunger for a beauty that can never escape him, and his crippling knowledge that nothing is worth loving because everything dies in his hands" (Beagle "Introduction" xii) deserve pity rather than condemnation. In contrast, Schmendrick's and Molly's painful experiences of immortality contribute to their spiritual growth: having been cursed with immortality, the magician wants to become mortal again, whereas Molly's belated meeting with a unicorn, though painful, frees her from a meaningless existence with Cully. Reiter argues that Beagle's stories "advocate a dialectic, a synthesis between the poles of mortality and immortality, suggesting that life ought to be lived in a balanced perspective that privileges neither the real nor the ideal but exults in both" (104). Unicorn's fate—her experience of mortality and consequently a new perception of immortality—strongly supports Reiter's claim.

In order to develop the themes of immortality/mortality in Unicorn's adventures, Beagle significantly reduces and then alters the traditional image of a unicorn. The process of reduction begins in the opening scene of the book: though the hunters call Unicorn the last of her kind, the younger man does not seem particularly disturbed by the world's loss of unicorns, since for him they are hardly anything other than fairytale creatures. Unicorn then decides to leave her fairytale, her Edenic forest, and step into the world of mortal people, who—blind to the *sacrum* of their world—further reduce her to a pretty horse. Finally, for Mommy Fortuna or Haggard, Unicorn (and her mythic kin) becomes nothing more than a means to fulfill their selfish desires. All of these reductions diminish Unicorn's mythological status and expose her to desires and dilemmas characteristic for mortality. The final step in

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the process of reduction is Unicorn's complete alteration: Schmendrick commits one of the most horrible deeds in the entire book—he traps an immortal soul in a mortal body.

The metamorphosis, though surprising, can be anticipated from the first chapter. When Unicorn learns that she is the last of her kind, her idle life is disrupted by unexpected emotional uncertainties, which is something characteristic for humans, not for mythic beasts. The anxiety finally compels Unicorn to abandon the forest in search of her kin, even though unicorns spend their entire lives in one place. Thus, Unicorn's subsequent bodily transformation seems a natural continuation of her psychological change and a result of being exposed to the mortal world.

In his analysis of *The Last Unicorn*, John Pennington (1989) applies William Blake's theory of contraries to argue that Beagle's novel explores the tensions between innocence and experience, mortality and immortality, without privileging one state over the other. Pennington recalls Blake's "fearful symmetry" of opposites in order to investigate the novel's metafictional aspects: how Beagle uses the conventions of fantasy literature to insert comments on fairytales and myths. Inspired by Pennington, Geoffrey Reiter explored the tensions between mortality and immortality. Yet he paid almost no attention to the theme of innocence/experience. Even Pennington did not attempt to narrow down these two categories and used them in a very broad sense. So, adopting Pennington's idea of analyzing Beagle's works through the theory of contraries, I want to argue that innocence and experience—understood as referring to human sexuality—are one of the main themes of *The Last Unicorn* and the cause of Beagle's alterations of the traditional unicorn mythos.

Unicorn, living in her Edenic forest, is the embodiment of innocence that knows nothing of desires which rule human life. This state of innocence is gradually threatened by Unicorn's experience of the mortal world and, eventually, the mythic beast becomes mortal. Unicorn's transformation disrupts a traditional pattern. No longer is the unicorn approached by a maiden: the unicorn becomes the maiden, so two images—of beast and virgin—are condensed into one. A male protagonist would be, perhaps, a less surprising choice. After all, a unicorn was attracted to virgins; in medieval times it was associated with knights (who were fierce in battle but gentle towards women), and even served as a symbol of Christ. Nevertheless, Beagle opted for a female beast.

Even though Beagle's description suggests that Unicorn is centuries old, her human body is that of a beautiful, young girl. This apparent inconsistency highlights the fact that though Unicorn might be old and wise for a mythological creature, her understanding of love and sexuality is that of a young and inexperienced woman. It is her relationship with Prince Lír that gradually teaches Unicorn, now called the Lady Amalthea, about passion and yearning. Exposed to the conditions of mortality and Lír's affection, Amalthea slowly forgets about her mythological origins, and her

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innocence becomes experience. In contrast to Mommy Fortuna's and Haggard's desire to possess immortality, Lír's yearning for the Lady is perhaps the purest one in the book: after the initial stage of infatuation, the Prince is satisfied by Amalthea's existence alone and does not care about her physical shape. The body ceases to be important, because Lír (an idealistic hero and an errant knight) admires the truth and beauty contained by the soul. Thus, even though Unicorn's departure leaves Lír grief-stricken, as a true hero he understands that certain (narrative) patterns cannot be disobeyed.

Despite their mutual feelings, Amalthea and Lír neither consummate their love nor even touch. This striking lack of physical contact can be explained either as the requirement of the chivalric convention chosen by Beagle or the prerequisite for fulfilling the novel's quest. On the one hand, the relationship between Amalthea and Lír resembles that between a lady and her knight: the lady is the object of distant worship and admiration, but not of sexual desires. On the other hand, according to the unicorn mythos present in the story, a man is forbidden to touch a unicorn regardless of its physical shape. Had the pair touched at least once, it would have been impossible for Amalthea to return to her mythic shape—the symbol of chastity and purity. And since Unicorn has to fulfill the task of finding her kin, she cannot be allowed to remain a human woman.

Apart from the requirements of the convention or narrative, the lack of physical contact can be explained by the position of masculine desire within the story. A hint of physical lust is present at the beginning of Lír and Amalthea's relationship: Amalthea says that the Prince does not desire her "thoughts," but wants her just like the Bull. However, during the months that follow her metamorphosis the Lady begins to understand that Lír's admiration is nothing like Haggard's (and the Bull's) greedy desire to possess. In the end, Lír is satisfied with loving Amalthea regardless of her physical shape. In other words, his masculine desire is exchanged for platonic love.

This theme of substitution is further developed in the relationship between Unicorn/Amalthea and the Red Bull/King Haggard. The novel never explains the relationship between the King and the Bull (who is the real master and who the servant) or how the Bull was created. Nonetheless, the beast fulfills Haggard's every wish, and so he chases the unicorns into the sea where they can be imprisoned to the King's delight. J.E. Cirlot points out that as a symbol, "the bull may be linked with the active, masculine principle" and, referring to Jung, he suggests that the bull might also be "a symbol for the father" (34-35). The color red is traditionally associated with love and passion. If we combine these explanations, it is easy to perceive the Red Bull as the symbol of male virility and mature masculinity. Thus, the Bull might be the external projection of the King's unfulfilled desires. Why they remain unfulfilled can be explained in two ways. Some elements of the novel imply that the King is impotent: his kingdom is withered (similarly to that of the Fisher King) and Lír is his

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adopted child. Thus, Haggard's desires might have been externalized in the form of the Red Bull. Or the Bull might have come into existence because of the King's general dissatisfaction with earthly pleasures, including sexual intercourses. Since Haggard yearns for immortal beauty and purity, he can obtain it only by having the Bull—this incarnation of his desires—imprison the unicorns. In this respect Haggard and Lír are similar: the King wants to possess the symbolic chastity represented by unicorns and the Prince chooses platonic love over his (physical) desire for Amalthea.

Readers might be surprised by the unicorns' passive acceptance of their fate—though in the past they have killed dragons and other beasts, they allow the Bull to imprison them in the sea. Their inability to defeat the Bull is grounded not in physical weakness, but in their innocence, because the Red Bull is "pure corrupted experience" (Pennington 15). Thus, in symbolic terms, the confrontation between the unicorns and the Bull is one between chastity and (Haggard's) masculine desire. Unicorn-Amalthea's own struggle to defeat the Bull exemplifies the symbolic dimension of this conflict.

During her first encounter with the Bull, Unicorn (still in her mythic shape) is unable to face the beast. She flees, backs down, runs in circles, but does not actually attack the enemy. In fact, she cannot even endure its presence. That is because she is the embodiment of chaste innocence, whereas the Bull—the incarnation of masculine desire—represents the force she has never experienced before. Unicorn is saved only thanks to the human body she is given by Schmendrick. Since the Bull represents the desire for immortal purity and beauty, he is not interested in Amalthea's human body—a mortal body which can be tainted. At least not until the novel highlights the unimportance of the physical shape in relation to spiritual qualities (Lír's affection for Amalthea); afterwards, the Bull chases after Unicorn even when she is still human.

Yet before the second confrontation with the Bull, Unicorn-Amalthea undergoes the transition from innocence to experience. Prince Lír's love is the catalyst of her psychological transformation: Amalthea learns about love and passion, and matures as a human woman, even though her love cannot be consummated. Consequently, Unicorn's victory over the Bull is inspired both by Lír's sacrifice and her regained innocence now "informed by experience" (Pennington 15). It is crucial that Unicorn challenges the Bull in her animal form, because the conflict between masculine desire and chastity is once again moved into the symbolic dimension: not a woman facing a man, but Unicorn facing the Bull. In the end, Unicorn becomes a paradox: a mythic beast that has experienced human mortality and passion. Though she returns to her Edenic forest, she is no longer the same creature. The experience of mortality has not diminished her, but elevated her to a new level of awareness: "she is now universal—immortal, mortal; innocent, experienced" (Pennington 16). Haggard is replaced by Lír, whose physical desire is supplanted by platonic love. Thus, he becomes the symbol of untainted masculinity, experienced yet innocent. The victory of idealistic love over physical desire is further reaffirmed by the Bull's descent into

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the sea where he is pushed by the chaste Unicorn. The barren lands of the kingdom are revived. Thus, despite Lír and Unicorn's separation, the ending vibrates with power. However, if Beagle had not written the sequel to *The Last Unicorn*, the readers could have rightly feared that, despite his knightly character and love for Unicorn, the idealistic Lír might one day become another Haggard whose yearning produced the Red Bull.

Though Beagle's reconstruction of the traditional mythos produced a very unique Unicorn, connections to Christianity can nonetheless be found. Firstly, the female Unicorn is still linked to Christ: her metamorphosis is a distant echo of divinity incarnated in human flesh, and her greatest miracle is resurrecting Lír. Secondly, her fate resembles that of Adam and Eve, who lived in the Garden of Eden until they received knowledge of good and evil, and their own sexuality. After their innocence was transformed into experience, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. Similarly, the Unicorn leaves her forest because her Eden-like existence is disrupted by knowledge (of her being the last) and previously unknown emotions. The journey into the world of men then puts an end to her former innocence, replacing it with innocence based on experience. Yet in contrast to Adam and Eve, Unicorn is allowed to return to her Garden. Finally, some biblical imagery is linked to unicorns' imprisonment in the sea:

> One Bible-related legend contends that the unicorn was too high-spirited to ride on Noah's ark with the other animals and that is how it became extinct. "The Unicorn," a popular 1967 song by the Irish Rovers with lyrics by Shel Silverstein, insisted the unicorns were too busy playing to make it onto the ark. (Godfrey 28)

Perhaps it was such a Bible-related tale that inspired Beagle to hide the unicorns in the sea.

Though *The Last Unicorn* preserves a few elements of the traditional mythos, the book is such an amusing and multi-faceted story because of its reconstructions of a well-known motif. Yet despite the novel's popularity, Beagle did not intend to write a sequel. Another unicorn appeared in his fiction many years later, in the short story entitled "Julie's Unicorn" (1995). Though a fair degree of mythopoetic speculation is again present, this unicorn retains more features of its medieval prototype than Unicorn-Amalthea.

The focus of the entire narrative is on a medieval tapestry in which a knight is forcefully leading a unicorn to his lady. With the use of old Japanese magic, Julie Tanikawa frees the frightened beast from the tapestry (it comes out in the size of a kitten) and takes it home. In a way, this is a repetition of the theme from *The Last Unicorn*: an immortal creature should not be enslaved to someone's delight regardless if the person is a king, a lady of the court, or a skillful artist. Though the title of the

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story is ambiguous, because it suggests possession, Julie eventually helps the unicorn return to its rightful place.

The unicorn's appearance and behavior are strongly inspired by traditional mythos. Described as having cloven hooves and quarters of a deer, Julie's unicorn (like Unicorn) remains true to medieval imagery, not to modern-day visions in which a unicorn is a horned horse. After it is freed, the miniature beast cannot grasp its own identity (again like Unicorn after her metamorphosis). It spends several days looking at itself in the mirror (while Joe Farrell, Julie's boyfriend, is playing medieval melodies), apparently trying to recognize itself after centuries of entrapment. The mirror is a reference to every unicorn's vanity—according to traditional lore they are creatures aware of their own unrivaled beauty—and to one of the tapestries included in the series "The Lady with the Unicorn"—"Sight." In this particular piece a lady holds a mirror which reflects a unicorn's image (Hathaway 90-91). Given the prominent role of a medieval tapestry in this story, Beagle's decision to make the unicorn stare into the mirror while searching for its identity could have been inspired by medieval artwork. In contrast to *The Last Unicorn*, this time the beast is not given its own voice or a human body. It is fierce, self-willed and mistrustful of humans. Despite their efforts, Julie and Joe cannot comprehend the creature's nature or desires—Julie's unicorn is a truly mythic beast only temporarily thrust into the human world. Though this is a huge change in comparison to *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle does not leave Julie's unicorn completely unaltered. For one thing, he reduces its mythic nature by making the miniature beast an object of humor: Farrell is worried that people will step on it or that it will be hunted down by Julie's cat, whereas the cat decides to adopt the unicorn as one of its kittens. These elements contribute to a significant reduction of the atmosphere of dignity and mysticism that usually surrounds unicorns. In addition, Beagle modifies the rules which regulate who can touch the creature. In contrast to *The Last Unicorn* and traditional tales, Joe may touch the beast and it does not seem particularly affected by male touch. It also does not seem to particularly care for virgins, or for women in general, since it is in search of a man, a hermit. While the unicorn's—a traditionally solitary creature's—desperate struggle to find its companion might be a surprising twist, its bond with a hermit is easier to explain. A hermit fits the story's medieval convention: it was a figure that often appeared in chivalric romances. But more importantly, seclusion from society and chastity which characterize a hermit's life are features characteristic also for unicorns. Thus, both experience life in the same way. Julie and Joe help the unicorn return to its proper place in the tapestry: not in the knight's captivity, but in the forest where the hermit is awaiting its return. Overall, though Julie's unicorn is closer to traditional mythos than Unicorn-Amalthea, in both cases Beagle forces the mythic beasts to, at least for a while, establish some relationships with humans.

These relationships are further explored in *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996). Beagle describes *The Sonata* as a book that was written to pay the bills ("Paradoxa

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Interview"), which partially explains why the ideas which worked so well in *The Last Unicorn* are less effective in this story. *The Sonata*, like *The Last Unicorn*, explores the dilemmas typical for mortal existence: tensions between innocence and experience, and transitions form one state to the other. But it also exaggerates the ideas used in *The Last Unicorn*: the unicorns of *The Sonata* are still beautiful creatures and their horns play a significant part in the story, but little more than that is left from the original mythos.

First of all, Beagle places the unicorns in their very own world, a parallel dimension called Shei'rah, accessible only to a few people. In Shei'rah the beasts are distinguished not only according to their position in a hierarchical community (leaders, elders, defenders, etc.), but also according to their descent (lanau, ki'lin, and karkadann; in the traditional unicorn lore, ki'lin is the unicorn of China and karkadann is of Persian origin), and appearance (they have various colors of the coat). On top of that, the unicorns even have their own names. As a result, in contrast to the traditional unicorn which was an ethereal creature living in solitude, the unicorns of *The Sonata* are both members of a hierarchical community and recognizable individuals. It is then revealed that they are not even immortal: they may die of old age. But since they are long-lived creatures, they have partially forgotten about their own mortality.

Secondly, Beagle recycles an idea from *The Last Unicorn*, but this time the unicorns are able to transform into humans whenever they wish. So they undergo transformations quite often and then temporarily leave Shai'rah, because human life is an object of their prevailing fascination. By giving the unicorns the ability to change, Beagle has not only altered their mythological status—they have become shape-shifters, but also reduced their status as a symbol of purity—unicorns that can freely experience human mortality may have already lost something of their untainted innocence. While in *The Last Unicorn* putting an immortal soul in a mortal body was a horrible deed, in *The Sonata* it has become the norm.

Thirdly, though Beagle finally includes a unicorn's horn as a motif of the story, he does not leave it unmodified. The horn becomes separated from a unicorn's body whenever it transforms into a human, and the beast cannot return to its original shape without it. In addition, the horns are the source of the otherworldly music which surrounds the creatures; when separated from the creature's body, the horn becomes a musical instrument. The atrocity of Indigo's wish to sell his horn is comparable to having Unicorn transformed into Amalthea. But while Unicorn's transformation was involuntary, Indigo's wish is an act of self-denial and betrayal. John Papas, the owner of a shop with musical instruments, initially behaves like the greedy King Haggard: he is overwhelmed by the desire to possess the horn and its extraordinary music, so he frantically collects gold to buy it. His yearning lessens only after he learns about the consequences of the trade, but he nonetheless buys the horn because such is the requirement of the narrative. Unicorns of *The Sonata* cannot

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be healed from their blindness unless somebody buys the horn and supplies gold that will be used as medicine.

The unicorns' blindness is the result of Indigo's struggle to move from innocence to experience: to forsake his mythic form in favor of a human life, because he is simply fed up with his current existence. It can be argued that the unicorns of *The Sonata* all represent what Unicorn-Amalthea has become at the end of her tale: innocence informed by (the frequent) experience of the mortal world. Indigo wants to further forsake innocence altogether and delve into the world of human experience; while in Shei'rah unicorns do not do much aside from "being," Indigo wants to explore the world and its possibilities. Just like Unicorn's human body of a young woman symbolized her lack of experience, Indigo's body of a teenage boy indicates his immaturity. Because of this immaturity, he is initially unable to recognize the corruptive effect of his actions. Indigo (like many young people) is blinded by his desires and uncertainties, and in order to achieve what he wants, he is ready to sell his horn—the key to his true identity—for money. As a result of his symbolic blindness, other unicorns become physically blind. To redeem Indigo from corruption, and to save the unicorns, Beagle turns the act of selling into a sacrifice: giving oneself for the benefit of others (which is a very distant echo of Christ's sacrifice). When Indigo finally sells his horn, it is both to start a new life as a human and to rescue his original community (gold will be the base for a healing ointment).

Indigo's struggles are witnessed by Joey Riviera, a musically gifted teenage girl who finds her way to Shei'rah. Joey initially functions in the role of the maiden approaching the unicorn, but the deepening bond between her and Indigo allows readers to wonder whether the two will have romantic feelings for each other in the future. In a way, Joey and Indigo become both a revision and a continuation of the relationship between Amalthea and Lír. Indigo's decision to be a human is a postponed fulfillment of Amalthea's wish to remain with Lír. Indigo's desire to fully experience the possibilities of human life will most probably include the experience of sexuality and mark the return of masculine desire which was diminished in *The Last Unicorn*. As for Joey, despite her mortality, her soul (like Lír's) resonates in contact with the otherworldly existence of the unicorns (and their music which she is able to recreate). But in contrast to Amalthea, Joey's femininity will not be limited by a mythological origin (she is only human) or narrative requirements (it is because she is human that she can help the unicorns). For these reasons, Joey and Indigo, united by their experience, might be able to establish in the future a successful relationship. In this respect, *The Sonata* is an alternative to *The Last Unicorn*, because the sexual potency that was restrained in *The Last Unicorn* might be reasserted by the pair of *The Sonata* ("might," because Joey and Indigo are still on the verge of adolescence and there are hardly any hints of romantic feelings in the book). Thus, though *The Unicorn Sonata* strongly exaggerates the ideas from *The Last Unicorn*, it indirectly provides an alternative to the novel's ending.

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In 2005, several years after the release of *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle published its short-story sequel entitled "Two Hearts." Having her best friend taken by a griffin that terrorizes her village, Sooz, the nine-year-old protagonist, decides to ask King Lír for help. On her journey to the castle she teams up with Schmendrick and Molly Grue. Lír is already an old man, but not another Haggard: his longing for Amalthea has never become a corrupted desire. Since he is still a true hero, he embarks on his last quest against the griffin. Unicorn makes a brief appearance only at the end of the story. She kills the beast, but does not heal the mortally wounded Lír. Instead, she revives Sooz's dog. Schmendrick is disappointed by the outcome, but Molly knows better: being able to let the loved one go is an evidence of true love and wisdom (especially since Lír is already a very old man). However, another explanation, confirmed by the way Beagle describes Unicorn in this tale, is also possible. The memories of the human love from several years ago might have been dulled by time and that is why Unicorn does not feel the need to revive Lír. In contrast to the novel, in "Two Hearts" Unicorn is not given a voice of her own. This is a major change in Beagle's fiction (since the unicorns of *The Sonata* were quite talkative), because it highlights Unicorn's status as a mythic beast not involved in the affairs of the mortal world. She is the true "Other" that is summoned by a magician—a person of power—and has little to do with mankind. Why is Unicorn so different in this tale? Perhaps after having exaggerated unicorns' humanity in *The Sonata*, Beagle felt that his mythopoetic speculation has gone too far and decided to return to the traditional mythos. As a result, Unicorn of "Two Hearts" is distant and otherworldly just like the unicorns of traditional legends, and there are hardly any bonds left between her and the mortal world. Perhaps her experience of mortality has been suppressed by innocence inborn to every unicorn.

Nevertheless, the idea of a bond between humans and unicorns is not completely absent from the traditional mythos. Nancy Hathaway retells a Bible-related story of creation, in which the unicorn—the first animal named by Adam—was elevated by God among other creatures (29-30). When Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden, the unicorn was given a choice to stay. However,

> [t]he unicorn looked to the angels hovering above the gate with their burning swords, and looked to Adam and Eve—and followed them. Forever after the unicorn was blessed for its compassion, for it could have stayed in that place of ideal beauty and delight, but instead, out of love, it chose the hard way—the human way. (Hathaway 30)

Though in some cases Beagle's unicorns, which are in constant transition between innocence—experience—innocence (based on experience), might seem a distortion of the traditional mythos, they also, in one way or another, experience "the human way" of life and participate in the affairs of the mortal world.

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